



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CULTURAL AND SOCIALIST  
ECOFEMINISM IN KATIE AGARY'S YELLOW-YELLOW AND CHRISTIE  
WATSON'S TINY SUNBIRDS FAR AWAY***

**IKECHI CHIOMA ELIZABETH**

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By

**IKECHI CHIOMA ELIZABETH**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts**

**January 2021**

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my dear Mother, Husband and my beautiful daughter. Mrs Nnenna Lovina Ikechi, Nwokeji Izuchukwu Kelvin and Nwokeji Amarachukwu Michelle. May the Universe bless them with prosperity and more years in good health.



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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**January 2021**

**Chairman : Rohimmi Noor**  
**Faculty : Modern Languages and Communication**

Most research in the field of ecofeminism has been limited to environmental issues, focussing predominantly on the effects of environmental destruction on women. Some researchers have examined victimized women in the light of ecological-feminism with reference to realism, poverty, hardship and the concept of the sexualised body. But my research strives to focus on fictional characters who suffer double exploitation but still strive to continue life irrespective of the challenges. These characters suffer exploitation and marginalization in their own home, which could be more distressing and become a driving force of resistance and violence that could cause harm to both the environment and its inhabitants. This aspect ecofeminism in literature has rarely been explored. Using Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*, I intend to fill this gap in the literature. This study on the portrayal of African female personalities provides a key to understanding the special qualities of contemporary African female writings in relation to the plight of women, their representation in the environment and incentives for empowerment through examining the characters Binaebi, Zilayefa, Mama, Blessing and Grandma. This study is intended to expose the wrong notion that women are "weaker vessels" as it interprets female strength in the mist of ecological crises that directly and indirectly affect them. This study therefore employs ecofeminism as a theory that shows the relationship between the exploitation of women and the destruction of the natural environment. This is accomplished by using Carolyn Merchant's concept of ecofeminism with reference to cultural and socialist ecofeminism in her book *Radical Ecology* as an analytical tool. The analysis is aimed at studying the female characters, their connection with the environment, the effects of ecological crises and the socio-economic conditions of women in the rural areas of Africa. This study also brings to light the motivation of women to gain empowerment using Konte and Tirivayi's idea as it relates to African women in *Women and Sustainable Human Development: Empowering*

*Women in Africa (Gender, Development and Social Change)*. This study concludes that the exploration of the natural resources in the Niger-delta for profit making reveals that women and nature are extremely exploited. This study suggests strong environmental policies to save both the African women and the environment which will balance up their socio-economic status and personality in the society.



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**PEMERKASAAN WANITA MELALUI EKOFEMINISME BUDAYA DAN SOSIAL DALAM KARYA *YELLOW YELLOW* OLEH KAINE AGARY DAN *TINY SUNBIRDS FAR AWAY* OLEH CHRISTIE WATSON**

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Sebilangan besar penyelidikan dalam bidang ekofeminisme hanya terbatas pada isu alam sekitar yang memfokuskan pada kesan pemusnahan alam sekitar kepada wanita. Kebanyakan penyelidik telah meneliti wanita yang menjadi mangsa dari sudut pandang ekologi-feminisme dengan merujuk kepada realisme, kemiskinan, kesusahan dan konsep pengseksualan tubuh. Namun kajian saya berusaha untuk memberi tumpuan kepada watak fiksyen yang mengalami eksploitasi berganda tetapi masih berusaha untuk meneruskan kehidupan dengan penuh cabaran. Watak ini mengalami eksploitasi dan marginalisasi yang amat mencabar di rumah mereka sendiri yang menjadi pendorong kepada penentangan dan keganasan yang dapat mendatangkan bahaya terhadap alam sekitar dan penduduknya. Aspek ini kurang diterokai. Melalui karya "Yellow Yellow" oleh Kaine Agary (2006) dan "Tiny Sunbirds Far Away" oleh Christie Watson (2011) saya berhasrat untuk mengisi jurang penyelidikan tersebut. Kajian yang menggambarkan keperibadian wanita Afrika ini memberikan kunci untuk memahami kualiti istimewa dalam penulisan wanita Afrika kontemporari berkaitan keadaan wanita, perlambangan mereka dalam persekitaran dan insentif pemeraksanaan mereka melalui watak Binaebi, Zilayefa, Mama, Blessing dan Nenek. Kajian ini dibuat untuk mendedahkan tanggapan salah tentang wanita sebagai "insan yang lemah" sebaliknya ia menafsirkan kekuatan wanita dalam krisis ekologi yang secara langsung dan tidak langsung memberi kesan kepada mereka. Oleh itu, kajian ini menggunakan ekofeminisme sebagai teori untuk menunjukkan hubungan antara eksploitasi wanita dan pemusnahan persekitaran semula jadi dengan menggunakan konsep ekofeminisme oleh Carolyn Marchant dengan penumpuan kepada ekofeminisme budaya dan sosialis dalam bukunya "Radical Ekologi" (2005) yang diterbitkan sebagai alat analisis. Ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji watak wanita, hubungan mereka dengan persekitaran, kesan krisis ekologi dan keadaan sosio-ekonomi wanita di kawasan luar bandar di Afrika. Kajian ini juga memperlihatkan motivasi wanita untuk mendapatkan kekuatan menggunakan idea

Konte dan Tirivayi berkaitan wanita Afrika. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa penerokaan sumber semula jadi di delta Niger untuk membuat keuntungan, menunjukkan bahawa wanita dan alam sangat dieksploitasi. Kajian ini mencadangkan dasar persekitaran yang kuat untuk menyelamatkan wanita Afrika dan alam sekitar seterusnya menyeimbangkan status sosio-ekonomi dan keperibadian mereka dalam masyarakat.





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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on \_\_\_\_\_ to conduct the final examination of Ikechi Chioma Elizabeth on her thesis entitled *WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CULTURAL AND SOCIALIST ECOFEMINISM IN KAINÉ AGARY'S YELLOW-YELLOW AND CHRISTIE WATSON'S TINY SUNBIRDS FAR AWAY*" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Arts.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

“Women’s experience with oppression and abuse, as well as their experience of mothering, can make them more sensitive to the oppression and abuse of nature, as well as better situated to remedy it” (qtd. in Mellor 102).

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the background of the study, research problem, research objectives, research questions, theoretical framework of the study, significance of the study, scope and limitations of the study, and a general overview of the thesis.

### 1.2 Background of the Study

Ecological feminism begins with noticing similarities and connections between forms and instances of human oppression, including the oppression of women and the degradation of nature (Cuomo 31). However, women and the environment are closely bonded and interconnected. Throughout history, women have been immortalized as powerful symbols of nature such as *Ala*, the Mother earth or Earth Goddess in Igbo cosmology as well as other African beliefs, Artemis in Greek mythology, and Mother River (The Yellow River) in Chinese history. Women have often personified and given nature its infinite meaning. Therefore, women, as bearers and conservers of life, as those who first guide children, should be foremost in dedication to the environmental cause (Shiva 6).

In the African setting, traditionally, most women have been relegated to roles based on human biology or the perceived sexes of masculinity and femininity. These roles include fetching water for domestic use, nurturing kids, cooking, farming, fetching firewood for cooking, fishing, which could be channelled to woman known as homemaker’s, while men are considered the breadwinners. Going by these roles, women are supposed to be subordinate, emotional, soft, nurturing, caring, and submissive, while men are rational, capable of making decisions, strong, protective, and superior. The roles relegated to women have rendered most of them voiceless even in the face of ecological degradation, although they are more affected when the environment is put at risk. To prove this assertion Molaria Ogundupe-Leslie observes:

Women are naturally excluded from public affairs, they are viewed as unable to hold positions of responsibility, rule men or even be visible when serious matters of state and society are been discussed. Women are viewed to need tutelage before they can be politically active. Politics is considered the absolute realm for men, women are not considered fit for political position in



modern African nation states, though their enthusiasm and campaign works are exploited by their various political parties. (23)

This study, however, presents the portrayal of women in a positive way with regard to how they have been relegated to the background culturally and their strength to rise towards creating new personalities for themselves through empowerment in the face of the challenges that surround them. This is to confute the assumption that women are 'weak' through examining the novels of the two selected writers on post-colonial Africa. Emmanuel Ngara sees the influence of reality in works of art as the social condition of women in literature paints a real picture of the way women are expressed in reality. He asserts that African literature celebrates the interests of male characters, drawing attention to most of the novels in the early period that portray males as heroes (e.g., Camara in *The African Child*, Waiyaki in *River Between*, Obi in *No Longer at Ease*). This observation shows that women play supplementary roles, and the principle female characters are portrayed as complementary to the main characters, who are usually males (34). This, according to Catherine Mibenge, affected some African female writings in several ways. One good example of an effect of this trend is seen in Bessie Head's novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* in which the main character is a man called Makhayai. However, 21st century African female writings have veered from this trend as they portray women as protagonists in their writings (Mibenge 2).

The personality of women in this research refers to the combination of characteristics or qualities that form an individual's distinctive character. This implies that women have special powers that make them different from their male counterparts. To prove this, Ibekwe, in his book *Anatomy of Female Power* asserts:

Female power exists; it hangs over every man like a ubiquitous shadow. Indeed, the life cycle of man, from cradle to grave, maybe divided into three phases, each of which is defined by the form of female power which dominates him: mother power, bride power or wife power. From the birth to puberty, he is ruled by mother power, as exercised over him by his one and only "Mummy dearest". Then he passes into the territory of the bride power as exercised over him by his bride-to-be.... He then passes into the domain of wife power, as exercised over him by his own resident matriarch. Alias his darling wife. (14)

Studying the African Female personality provides special keys to understanding the portrayal of the African women in literary works. Since the concept of personality is unsteady, it could explain the different ways in which women are portrayed in contemporary writings, especially in a new light contrary to the generalization of women as being weak. Ibekwe, in the above assertion, explained ways in which women's power exists but still acknowledges women's domination, which he said is embedded in the male power dynamic, which is hard, aggressive and boastful in contrast to women's power (22). In this study, the representation of the female characters, their actions and inactions, and their mental processes in the narrative

reveal women to be fully involved in human experiences, which enables them to gain more women's power and in turn, acquire great personalities through being empowered. This gives them powerful voices in their community despite being doubly exploited.

Women as powerful voices for change can be traced to the 1970s and the activities of the Chipko movement in India which gained worldwide publicity. This was followed in 1977 by the Kenyan green belt movement initiated by anatomy professor Wangari Maathai, who launched a rural tree planting programme, which provided great inspiration for a wider ecofeminist movement (Mellor 20). This caused women everywhere to start formulating ecological feminist responses to the health and environmental impacts of globalization. Just as women and men are noted as having opposing stands with regard to the environmental knowledge, that the environment is gendered, women and men also respond differently to environmental issues as women are more responsive to nature (Eaton and Lorentzen 14). In this regard, the present study establishes the connection between women and nature by documenting the effects of environmental pollution and degradation on the lives of the female characters. The researcher thus took cognizance of the fact that the toxic pesticides, chemical wastes, acid rain, radiation and other pollutants first take their toll on women's reproductive systems and children.

This study, however, questions the establishment of an ideology or culture that permits human activities to impact nature in ways which threaten life and the means of survival. This is especially focused on with regard to the characters who are economically deprived and impoverished by examining the effects of environmental pollution on the lives and experiences of women as portrayed in texts. Shiva argues the need to examine the connections between the violence of unjust, non-sustainable economic systems and the growing frequency of brutal violence against women and the need to see how the traditional patriarchal societal structure has now merged with an emerging capitalist patriarchal structure to intensify violence against women (Mies and Shiva Preface).

In examining the connections between women and their natural environment and socio-economic exploitation in relation to the degradation of nature, cultural and socialist ecofeminism theories are employed because of their concern with women's connections with nature and the economic empowerment of women. This will be examined in detail using Carolyn Merchant's theory of ecofeminism as found in her book *Radical Ecology*. The theoretical perspectives employed may be used in the analysis of environmental problems from within a critique of patriarchy and offer alternatives that could liberate both women and nature (197).

According to Merchant, environmental justice includes all areas of human endeavours, not just plants and animals. It should also relate to women and the different roles they play in the society that are beneficial to both women and nature. This contrasts with the Western system that propounds the belief in human superiority to the natural world (Merchant, *Ecology*) which triggered most of the

decisions made by the Western patriarchal system as it also became a means by which they have exploited natural resources for their benefits. However, Merchant encourages partnership with the environment for the benefit of all lives.

As part of the personality development as envisioned for the characters in this research, the spur to women's empowerment came through education and economic independence, especially for those women in rural areas. This study explains this aspect of empowerment in detail by using Konte and Tirivayi's ideas as they relate to the African women portrayed in their book *Women and Sustainable Human Development: Empowering Women in Africa* (Gender, Development and Social Change).

Literary authors today use people's life experiences to portrayed characters in their fictional works as a medium to address life issues and problems of the environment. Two such authors are Kaine Agary and Christie Watson, the writers of *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) and *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* (2011). These are the two novels used in this study. Kaine Agary is the renowned novelist who authored *Yellow-Yellow*, published in 2006. She won the NLNG prize for Literature 2008 and the ANA/Chevron prize for environmental writing. Agary, who lived in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, also experienced the ills around the Niger Delta region, and she sees her writing as a means of telling the Niger Delta story through a woman's voice. Christie Watson, on the other hand, is a trained paediatric nurse who worked as a senior staff nurse and educator for more than ten years. She married a Nigerian, and later gained her MA in creative writing at the University of East Anglia. *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*, published in 2011, is her first novel and won the Costa First novel award in the same year. A British novelist, some of her novels include *Where Women Are Kings* and *Here I Stand*. Her novels are realistic works of literature, which she uses as a means of educating the world. She has gained popularity with her work and has made a mark for herself, especially in her ability to portray the realities of life.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

Humans all over the world, have always desired and sought means to control the weather, seasons and creatures in the environment where they live. But degradation and exploitation of the earth and the suppression of its citizens, especially in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, proves that humans have not only lost control over the activities in their environment but also on their fellow humans as well, which is extremely felt by women because of the roles to which they have been relegated in the society. Women are often portrayed as weak, powerless and most times, silenced by the patriarchal system, which often leads to their mental, emotional and physical oppression. Most African women are of the opinion that African culture is a patriarchal dominated culture, which means it is one organised in favour of and the interest of men, because they have been trained to think in such ways. Tracing the African writing tradition in history, women have been neglected as powerful voices for change in the society (Ogundupe-Leslie 23). Ecofeminist literary criticism explains how power imbalances due to gender in a given culture by examining the

struggles of women due to how they are societally gendered, equally highlighting the issues of ecology which have added to women's struggle caused by the patriarchal world view that sees women as weak and permits domination.

In examining early writings in literary studies, it is seen that a pattern was followed which involves portrayal of female characters in literary works as complementary or supplementary to the main male characters. This pattern is deeply rooted in the colonial literature. This may be traced from Shakespearean works down to the early African literary writings, including works from the likes of Chinua Achebe to Wole Soyinka and Flora Nwapa. Their writings confirm the patriarchal nature of possessiveness in all spheres (Merchant, *Earthcare*), which indirectly affected female African writers in their writings (Mibenge 2). This study portrays women in a new light other than the old trend it was known for by debunking the general perception of women being 'weak' through the presentation of the characteristics of the female characters which speaks volumes about them as voices for change in the environment.

Many scholars have studied the two texts Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* in the light of ecocriticism, feminism and ecofeminism with reference to hardship, biracialism, environmental issues, slavery, culture and the concept of the sexualised body. Their findings have led to further discussion and have revealed gaps which the researcher seeks to explore in this study through the combination of both texts in examination of the representation of women. This is done with a view to identifying the spur to women's empowerment which gave the characters new personalities in their environments irrespective of the biological gender depictions of women while at the same time, casting a light on the era in a significant way.

Related to this inter-relationship of life experiences, almost the entire process of this study reflects the idea of ecofeminist theory that portrays women's relationship with nature, ecological degradation and their effects on women. Therefore, the focus is on the female characters and their connection with nature and how they strive to get liberated in the midst of the environmental crises which helped them to continue their life processes despite the violence and pollution done to the environment. My framework uses the ecofeminism mechanism to portray the life and experiences of the characters and to examine their emancipation and empowerment through their African background. Sontheimer observes that research has verified that the predominant theme that emerges from reading literature is not usually women as victims of ecological crisis but rather the extraordinary ability of women to organise themselves to fight ecological destruction and carry out actions that both improve their lives and make a significant contribution to the local community development (qtd. in Mellor 34).

Therefore, in exploring the gap in knowledge on the topic area focused on in this study, ecofeminism is used as a theory to be applied on the selected texts. Knowing that women are closer to nature because of the roles that are relegated to them means



that the effect of any damage done to the environment is felt first by women. Since ecofeminism theory considers the relationship between women who are exploited and the destruction of the environment, the theory is relevant in filling the gap that exists in the representation of women in contemporary writings. Carolyn Merchant's concept of ecofeminism in her book *Radical Ecology* is used as an analytical tool to prove that the new portrayal of women in a positive light has now taken centre stage in African writing and it also helps in creating new personalities for women in the society. To achieve this, two broad sub-divisions of ecofeminism as outlined by Merchant are employed—cultural and socialist ecofeminism—for both texts. Also, putting into consideration women being empowered in the African environment, Konte and Tirivayi's study is used to explicate how women get empowered in the African contexts which changed their personalities.

This study also sought for and elaborated on the causes of the violence and ecological crises in the environment which the victims experienced as double exploitation and that in turn empowered them and shaped their personalities into what they finally became. This emphasis, however, is to make a case for the strength of women in the African environment, where they are sole builders of their destinies.

The texts of Agary and Watson used for this study suggest that one can suffer outside his/her home town and take it in stride but suffering and being maltreated in your own home and community could be more distressing and become a driving force of resistance and violence which could cause harm to both the environment and its inhabitants. This study will further establish that African women have gone beyond the weaker vessel to become a powerful force and voice for change as it exists in the contemporary African female writings, considering their status in a patriarchal dominated society.

#### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

Most female writers in history portrays gender issues as one cause of female oppression, but in the contemporary writings, environmental and patriarchal system have directly or indirectly influence the work of most female writers. In this study, the environmental issues and women subjugation are set to be studied within the framework of ecofeminist criticism. Following this assertion this study has the following objectives:

- Firstly, to identify cultural and socialist ecofeminism in the novels by analysing the characteristics of the female characters within the general environment of the African society where they live.
- Secondly, to investigate the problems faced by the characters in the degraded environment as seen in the novels through cultural and socialist ecofeminism.
- Thirdly, to examine the motivations of women that lead to their empowerment as portrayed in the selected texts.

## 1.5 Research Questions

From the above statement of the problem and objectives, the following research questions could be drawn:

- In what way did the characteristics of the female characters in the novels portray cultural and socialist ecofeminism as characterised within the context of the African society?
- What are the problems the characters faced in the degraded environment as seen in the selected novels as determined through cultural and socialist ecofeminism?
- What are the motivations of women which lead to their empowerment in the texts?

## 1.6 Theoretical Framework

This study utilized ecofeminism as a tool to analyse both texts under study. Ecofeminism as an ecological feminist movement aimed at bringing together ecological and feminism ethics in exploring the connection between environmental deterioration and the oppression of women. The primary concern of ecofeminism is to investigate the oppression of women and the natural environment as its tenets centre on all related matters of domination and oppression as being interrelated. It is against this backdrop that it calls for an end to all forms of oppression, arguing that a society built in the feminine does not mean power in the hands of women but no power at all as human beings would be treated as human beings, not as male or female. This would help in liberating nature as well as women, who are mostly known to be dominated in the society and share the same vulnerable position as nature (Merchant, *Ecology*).

According to Merchant, the founding mother of 'Ecofeminism' Françoise d'Eaubonne placed the death of the planet on the shoulders of men. The mantra of ecology-feminism was to tear the planet away from the male domination of today, which is centred on patriarchy. Patriarchal power is a male system created some centuries ago that enabled men's agricultural overexploitation and industrial overexpansion, which led to the loss of the nature's symbolic significance and made life harder on the earth (24-25).

Some authors (Mies and Shiva; Mellor; Sturgeon) have stated that ecological degradation has detrimental effects first on women and then on others (i.e., men, children, animals and the environment). This could be traced to the female role in the environment as women tend to be more involved in nurturing and caretaking (homemakers). Such ecological problems include deforestation, pollution, toxic waste disposal, erosion, climatic change, infertile land, flooding, irresponsible environmental management by companies and factories, and polluted water. Women

as household managers are first to suffer when access to sustainable livelihoods are halted.

Carolyn Merchant's argumentation on ecofeminism in *Radical Ecology* is explored in the analyses of the texts with reference to cultural and socialist ecofeminism taken from other sub-concepts of ecofeminism presented in her work. Ecofeminism is considered as feminism with concerns on ecological issues. It acts on a new perception that the domination of nature entails the domination of human beings, irrespective of race, class, and gender by establishing that the main cause of all domination is the creation of patriarchy. Therefore, the liberation of women and nature from the patriarchal structure that dominates and exploits them is of necessity. In this regard, this study examines the role of women in the society in relation to the degradation of the environment as it affects the lives of the female characters as portrayed in the texts.

Within the concepts of ecofeminism, this study utilized cultural and socialist ecofeminism as presented by Merchant. Cultural ecofeminism is a response to the connection between women and nature with regard to women's bodies and their function: as women bring forth life, so does nature. Psychologically, women have been assigned greater emotional capacities than men, which has encouraged the association of women with environmental matters. This notion focusses on the beliefs that humans are biologically sexed and socially gendered. Sex/gender relations give men and women different power bases in the society; therefore, women's biology and nature are celebrated as sources of female power. The cultural ecofeminist calls for the liberation of women through a strong political policy or actions that will be in favour of women and nature (Merchant, *Radical Ecology* 202). This study identifies areas where cultural ecofeminism has been depicted through the characteristics of the female characters in the novels.

On the other hand, socialist ecofeminism questions gender and nature's domination by focussing on the economic and social roots of domination as nonhuman nature is seen as the material basis of all lives, and food, clothing, shelter, and energy are essential to the maintenance of human life. It therefore questions the materialistic tendency of humans to exploit nature and the economic system, which leads to the exploitation of women (208). Many socialist ecofeminist scholars use the concept of the 'capitalist-patriarchy' to describe the manifestation of dominance over women and the socio-economic system. Mary Mellor has criticized the world of the capitalist "economic man" as one in which some men and some women are liberated at the expense of the rest of humanity and the planet (Mellor 300). Social ecofeminists advocate for the liberation of women and nature through overturning the extant economic and social justice systems (Merchant, 1996 6). This study examines the socialist ecofeminist premise in the novels.

According to Merchant, women may or may not identify themselves explicitly as ecofeminists. They nevertheless assume or act on the connections between women and nature (Merchant 2005:193). However, on the theoretical level, ecofeminism

contributes the necessary insight into the link between the abuse of power on personal and political levels that underlies human oppression and environmental exploitation (Gaard 16). In all these challenges women are faced with, they seek to be empowered in order to take control of their lives and actively participate in their society's dealings.

Women's empowerment is not new as it is one of the means women have used in changing their personalities, especially in patriarchal-favoured societies. Konte and Tirivayi have presented an important and insightful study on women's empowerment in the African continent in their book *Women and Sustainable Human Development: Empowering Women in Africa (Gender, Development and Social Change)*. Their research shows how development policy has acknowledged the exclusion of women in development processes due to traditional, customary and informed rules and practices which expose women to unfair treatment in society and in turn, become motivational to women as they see empowerment as a necessity if they are to continue life processes in the African environment due to gender bias in the social system (qtd. in Konte and Tirivayi 37-40). This study examines what motivates women to empower themselves in the texts using their African backgrounds.

An empowered woman is one who can take decisions, understand the difference between right and wrong things, is educated and has knowledge on various issues (Personal interview, 16 April 2017) (qtd. in Jha, Ghatak, Menon, Dutta and Mahendiran 1). Empowerment could mean different things to different people. Going by this definition, this study focuses on women's empowerment in related issues in the texts by using two motivational techniques (i.e., education and economic independence) from those quoted by Mbaye in Konte and Tirivayi's study.

In conclusion, this study explicates the characters in the two selected texts: *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) and *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* (2011). The interpretation of the texts is based on Merchant's theory as discussed in *Radical Ecology* (2005). With reference to cultural and socialist concepts of ecofeminism as the focus. It is also examined if, in case these concepts are portrayed by the characters in the novels, they have a role to play in remodelling the female characters through empowering themselves so as to discover their true place in the society using Konte and Tirivayi's suggestions in *Women and Sustainable Human Development: Empowering Women in Africa (Gender, Development and Social change)* (2020).

## 1.7 Significance of the Study

Women and their environments have always enjoyed strong natural affinities. Strong attachments to the natural environment in the works of 19th century English Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley are proof of this. Moreover, Lawrence Buell and other twentieth century American eco-critics have equally drawn inspirations from nineteenth century American nature writers, and even made them the objects of their enquiries. Modern African writers and critics are equally not left out in the concern over the role of literature in mirroring women and



environmental studies. This is because we live in a world where all forms of ecological disasters, ranging from severe erosion of the earth's surface, earth tremors, overflow of water banks (otherwise known as tsunami), and the fast depletion of the ozone layer, reported almost daily by earth watchers, are all attributable to the carelessness of man and over exploitation of nature and the environment. Literary critics who derive inspiration from nature have demonstrated the fact that they cannot afford to be indifferent to these grim happenings.

It is for these reasons that this study on ecofeminism on the selected texts becomes important with two subsections of ecofeminism employed: cultural and socialist ecofeminism. These two sub-divisions of ecofeminism are applied to the novels considering women's association with nature to help show how they strive toward liberation and the strength they portrayed to continue life. The portrayals created by the writers of degraded environments help empower the characters economically, which in turn raises the standards of the society by enabling them to question the harmful events occurring in the society.

Cultural ecofeminism questions ecological crises as women, especially African women, see themselves as more connected with nature, considering the societal role assigned to them. Therefore, they suffer more in a polluted environment compared to their male counterparts. This study helps in proving the existence of the exploitation and the degradation of the environment by interpreting the reoccurring events and the experiences of the characters as portrayed in the novels.

Literary criticism is interconnected with the criticism of the socio-economic growth of the society, which is the main point questioned by socialist ecofeminism. Questioning the socio-economic growth of the society empowers women and makes them feel safe in the society and equally makes them interested in political power. On this note, this study attempts to identify the female voice as a powerful voice for change.

This study portrays African women through a positive perspective in the various roles assigned to them as agents of change in the male favoured African society through dismantling the patriarchal structure, which is deeply rooted in many African cultures. This study therefore succeeds in justifying that the fight to save women and improve the environment is not exclusively reserved for women alone. Men are also involved, as shown in the novels. It is also shown that the old assumption that women are 'weak vessels' does not hold water anymore as this texts portrays the female characters as strong and rational beings in the face of ecological crisis which they achieved through empowering themselves to change their personality in the environment.

This study will make significant contributions to the body of knowledge, especially in the area of ecofeminism and African Literature as it will motivate young female writers to question the patriarchal system in investigating women's victimization,

and it will equally serve as an anchorage for other researchers in the field of literature and enrich current perspectives on global ecofeminists' conditions.

## 1.8 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study covers two books from different female writers, but the story lines and settings are channelled to the same geographical background and the same ethnic context. This is considering the fact that contemporary African female writings have over emphasized the issue of feminism, ecocriticism and gender equality from the perspective of women seeking visibility in the male centred society. Thus, topics are mostly treated with the texts, and this study is carried out from Carolyn Merchant's viewpoint of cultural and socialist ecofeminism, analysing the works of Agary and Watson. The novels selected for each of the authors. The texts are *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) and *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* (2011), and so far, the texts have never been discussed jointly from the perspective of cultural and socialist concepts of ecofeminist theory in critically interpreting the novels, and also Mbaye's ideas as quoted in Konte and Tirivayi's study are employed in examining women's empowerment which changed their personalities.

The texts in the study are from the West Africa region and the representation of women in the texts could be seen as similar to other writings that portray women and their relationship with nature in most countries in West Africa (Nwabufo and Onapajo; Steady). In relation to other regions like South Africa, Dianne Shober observed that during the apartheid period, writers neglected the gender domination of strong patriarchal ideologies inflicted by the country in exposing the situation to the global audience. This led to some female writers honestly portraying gender-based inequality, which was designed to make women resist their diminished stature in the society as this was attributed to a form of government founded on injustice and inequality. The patriarchy was pointed out as the prime factor in global environmental and gender oppression because they constructed women, people of colour, animals and nature as 'other', thereby diminishing their stature and rights (Shober 1-2).

Also in the African context, women are economically deprived due to their dependence on cultural practices enforced by men, which has led to different strategies employed by women to overcome their challenges. Cheryl Potgieter draws attention to how women have adopted strategies in response to the threat of environmental degradation. For example, the women of Kenya in East Africa formulated the Green Belt Movement in 1977. This was a protest organised against environmental degradation led by Wangari Maathai, which later became an organisation and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. The National Council of Women in Kenya also organised economically deprived women to fight against deforestation and environmental degradation (Potgieter 128-132).

The major focus of the thesis is on the analysis of the female characters in the selected texts, their experiences which relate to their connections with nature, and the terrible socio-economic conditions of the environment. In order to cope in the environments that became very challenging for them, the characters sought for means to empower themselves so as to change their views regarding their personality traits. This study examines the stressful times in the lives of the characters who experienced not only oppression but felt doubly exploited.

These literary texts have been continuously studied within the African post-colonial epoch, which has helped in the development of literature in the African continent. The literary texts for this study appeared in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The time chosen is between (2006-2011), which is a period long enough to enable this study to trace the contemporary social issues in African society. This study focuses on the authors' characterizations in relation to the characters' respective roles, their strengths and processes through their emancipation in light of the principles of cultural and socialist ecofeminism as portrayed in each of the novels and also taking into consideration women empowerment which changed their personality. This study equally argues that the patriarchal system of operation is deeply rooted in African culture and that the degradation of the environment and the exploitation of women are tied together by the same fate in Africa. This study further explores ecofeminist theory in the textual analysis to effectively establish the importance of the female quest for liberation and equally, the exploitation of both women and the environment.

This study solely focusses on the two selected literary texts by Agary and Watson and will not discuss other African female writings or other works by the same writers. Considering the fact that these texts are contemporary works and are set in post-colonial era in African society, other literary theories that could be identified with the texts will not be discussed or even considered in this study. From the theories of Marxism, feminism, trauma, ecocriticism and also in the larger theoretical area of ecofeminism, only cultural and socialist ecofeminism will be used as a tools for textual analysis.

### **1.9 Justification of the selected Texts**

The two novels for this study are written by two different women, one whom is a Nigerian by birth and from the Niger Delta region and the other an English woman, though a Nigerian by marriage. The story lines of both literary texts share the same ethnic background and settings. The texts discuss the issue exploitation of the natural environment and its resources and the oppression of women. The idea behind selecting these literary texts is that they are suggestive of widespread ecological degradation and the suppression of women in African society, especially in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The lives of the women in this environment are filled with abundant natural resources, which should be beneficial to them but have become a curse for them.

For example, the character Binaebi in *Yellow-Yellow*, a peasant farmer and a single mother, lost her farm and only source of sustenance to an oil spill and as portrayed in the text, became devastated and traumatised over the ordeal. Although the characters Mama, Blessing, Ezikiel, Grandma and Alhaji in *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* should have benefitted from their environment as it was rich in natural resources, they encountered a lot of distressing experiences in their home. These examples establish the conditions of the characters in their various environments, where it is believed that they should feel safe and treated like natives in their lands, but their experiences saw the need for resistance, which led to heart-breaking and agonizing events.

The two selected works of Agary and Watson are timely to the quest pursued by this study as they are set in the contemporary era. The timeframe within which these texts was chosen (2006-2011) enables this study to put forward societal issues and individual experiences of the age.

### **1.10 Methodology**

This study interprets women's strength in the face of the ecological exploitation which led them to struggle for their emancipation. This is accomplished using Carolyn Merchant concept of ecofeminism with reference to cultural and socialist ecofeminism theory from the perspective of some selected African female writers. The two novels are authored by two female writers from different backgrounds but united by a common idea that is channelled towards addressing ecological issues and their effects on women in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. As a study in modern African literature, ecofeminism is considered a current theory to be employed as a tool for textual analysis. This is in line with the definition of textual analysis put forward by Frey, Botan and Kreps. This approach encompasses beliefs in the struggle to end all forms of domination, exploitation and suppression of nature and its resources and equally in addressing the suppression of women by giving them a voice, freedom and most especially, empowering them economically in the African society. This is achieved by interpreting the novels within the conflict in the growth and development of the African society, dealing with environmental degradation as it affects the female characters and how they are exploited in the patriarchal structured society.

The investigation on the selected characters reveals their traumatic experiences, unpleasant events and the struggles they went through to overcome their challenges. This study establishes the impact of cultural and socialist ecofeminism, which reveals that the perpetrators of all forms of oppression are found in the patriarchy, which has an ideology that permits domination in order to achieve what they stand for. This turns out to be destructive for the vulnerable people in the society, who are mostly women. Because of the cultural programming, the women who view themselves as closely related to nature feel doubly exploited by those people they felt could protect and safeguard them. The response of the female characters to the challenges they are faced with is to empower themselves by changing their



personalities, which gives them powerful voices in their communities. This was properly investigated by highlighting the personal and societal problems encountered by women, the environmental concerns affecting the characters, and women's empowerment.

The literature review was conducted by tracing the origin of the key terms employed in this study. Terms like, feminism, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, cultural ecofeminism, socialist ecofeminism and women's empowerment. These topics are discussed from the academic perspective in order to establish the study within the contemporary literary discourse.

The texts studied are Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*. The major concern of the study is reflected in the method in which the narrative is interpreted in relation to the portrayal/representation of the female characters by the authors of the texts, which involves critical examination of the lives, experiences and processes of growth which transform the female characters into strong personalities with powerful voices for change and speak for all oppressed people in the African literary experience.

This study utilizes the theory of ecofeminism with the concept of cultural and socialist ecofeminism in answering the first and second research questions, while the last question was answered through the use of Konte and Tirivayi's study on empowerment as it showcases the real picture of African women in their environments and their zest for changing their personalities. In answering the first research question, Binaebi in *Yellow-Yellow* is one of the characters that fully represents the connection between women and nature. She was chosen because of her identification with nature, which explains why she was extremely devastated when her farm was ruined by the oil explosion portrayed in the text. In *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*, Mama and Grandma portray the features of cultural ecofeminism as put forward by Merchant because of the social, physical and physiological abilities of women which they portrayed in the text.

Since socialist ecofeminism aims at bringing to light the socio-economic conditions of the environment and its effects on women, Binaebi is a perfect character for representing the socialist ecofeminist premise through her experiences in the text, while Ezikiel and Mama in *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* also fit this description as they were victims of the exploitation of the environment that they believed could have been avoided.

In the investigation of the problems faced by the characters in the degraded environment, the fate of women in the degraded environment and the journey towards self-realisation is discussed in relation to cultural ecofeminism as it best represents the plight of women and their relationship with the environment. Socialist ecofeminism was the theoretical basis for investigating the quest and after-effects of the absence of a father in the family and violence in the form of environmental

activism. This theory was used to delineate the socio-economic conditions in the environment as motivation for the actions of the characters in the texts.

The last research question centres on the motivations of women's empowerment through the use of Mbaye's concept in Konte and Tirivayi's study on African women's experiences and how they work to liberate themselves in the environment, which changes their personalities. For instance, Sisi in *Yellow-Yellow*, who is mixed race, becomes a business tycoon, which gained her a respectable personality despite not being educated. On the other hand, Blessing in *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* metamorphizes from a 'little girl' to a midwife in the local community, which changes how people see her even though she is just twelve years old, which makes her powerful. These novels are analysed within the continuum of African female writings in the post-colonial era.

In support of its methodological scope, this study is divided into four chapters. Chapter one provides an introduction to the study, giving an overview of the background of the study by discussing the interconnectedness between women and nature and how women suffer immensely during ecological crises. It identifies the research objectives that determine the scope, limitations and emphasis of the study. Chapter two examines the review of related literature. This chapter presents a review of previous works on feminism, ecocriticism, history of ecofeminism, cultural and socialist ecofeminism. Thus, the related literature on the conceptual framework is covered. Chapter three deals with the interpretation and analysis of the texts using Merchant's concepts of ecofeminism in achieving the first and second objectives of the study, while Konte and Tirivayi's study is used for the last objective. Chapter four is the conclusion. This final chapter presents an overview of the main findings of this study and provides an evaluation of how ecofeminists contribute to the body of knowledge on the subject of women within their environment influenced by the patriarchal system and also recommendations for further research.

## **1.11 Definitions of Key Terms**

### **1.11.1 Feminism**

Feminism is an ideology or a social movement that advocates for social, political and economic equality of both sexes.

### **1.11.2 Ecocriticism**

Generally speaking, ecocriticism is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literature scholars analyse texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature.

### **1.11.3 Ecofeminism**

The term ecofeminism is also called ecological feminism. It is a branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature. It was coined by Francoise d'Eaubonne, a French feminist, and it mostly emphasises the way both nature and women are treated by the patriarchal-centred society.

### **1.11.4 Cultural Ecofeminism**

Cultural ecofeminism is a branch of ecofeminism that encourages the association of women and nature. Its adherents contend that women have more intimate relationships with nature because of their gender roles and their biological composition.

### **1.11.5 Socialist Ecofeminism**

Social ecofeminism is a branch of feminist theory which shows the socio-economic status of women through indicating how natural resources and women are exploited under capitalism. This also can be seen as an expansion of Marxist theory beyond its focus on class and mode of production.

### **1.11.6 Women's Empowerment**

Women's empowerment is all about equipping and allowing women to make life-determining decisions in response to different problems in the society. This means women having the capability to make important decisions in their lives while being able to act on them.

## **1.12 Conclusion**

This chapter provides the introductory part of the study with a broad background on the concept of the connection between women and nature by tracing it through history, which is the major aim in establishing ecofeminism. The main argumentation of this study is also presented in the chapter. This chapter covers the statement of the problem, objectives of the study, research questions, the theoretical framework, scope, limitations and justification of the selected texts of the study. All these aforementioned subtopics give detailed insight into the development of this study.

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